

CHRISTIAN  
JENNINGS

AUTHOR OF *At War on the Gothic Line*

# FLASHPOINT TRIESTE

THE FIRST BATTLE  
OF THE COLD WAR



IN THE DYING DAYS OF WORLD WAR II,  
OLD ALLIES BECOME NEW ENEMIES



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OF THE COLD WAR



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JENNINGS



*This book is dedicated to the exceptional  
and inspirational Kat Sacco and Giulia Mate.  
The best of Italy.*

*Questo libro è dedicato a Kat Sacco e a Giulia Mate.  
Un'ispirazione eccezionale, il meglio dell'Italia ...*

This electronic edition published in 2017 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Osprey Publishing,  
PO Box 883, Oxford, OX1 9PL, UK  
1385 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018, USA

E-mail: [info@ospreypublishing.com](mailto:info@ospreypublishing.com)

OSPREY PUBLISHING, PART OF BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING PLC

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN: 978 1 4728 2170 6

PDF e-book ISBN: 978 1 4728 2172 0

ePub e-book ISBN: 978 1 4728 2171 3

Index by Zoe Ross

Cartography by [Bounford.com](http://Bounford.com)

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro

Originated by PDQ Media, Bungay, UK

Front cover images: Partisan, France, September 1944 (Photo by Mondadori Portfolio via Getty Images); Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia, Trieste (Tu xa Ha Noi).

Page 4: A policeman stands lookout outside Trieste, February 1952. (Photo by Walter Sanders/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)

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# CONTENTS

<i>Preface: This Land is My Land, June 2016</i>	9
<i>Author's Note</i>	22
<i>Maps</i>	23
PART ONE: THE FALL OF TRIESTE	
1. The Race for Trieste, April 1945	32
2. Holding Trieste, 29 April – 1 May	50
3. The Capture of Trieste, 1–2 May	62
PART TWO: REVENGE IN TRIESTE	
4. Kidnapped by the Partisans	79
5. Revenge and Reprisals on the Dalmatian Coast	95
6. Death on the Plateau, 2–3 May	106
PART THREE: BRINKMANSHIP ON THE ADRIATIC	
7. Who was Marshal Tito?	118
8. The Allies' Support for Yugoslavia	123
9. Marshal Tito Plays a Double Hand	132
10. Dividing Trieste, June 1945	145

#### PART FOUR: COLONIALISM ON THE ADRIATIC

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11. Spies on the Adriatic, May–August 1945	156
12. Very British Intelligence	166
13. The Capture of Friedrich Rainer and Odilo Globocnik, May 1945	172
14. A New Enemy for the Allies, June 1945	184
15. A New American Sheriff in Trieste, June 1945	194

#### PART FIVE: WAR IN THE SHADOWS

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16. Hidden Conflict, July 1945	203
17. <i>OZNA Sve Dozna</i> (OZNA Can Find Out Anything), August–September 1945	217
18. A Gurkha Beheading, October–December 1945	223

#### PART SIX: THE NEW EUROPE

---

19. Bloody Compromise, February–April 1946	233
20. The Free Territory of Trieste, March–August 1947	244
21. Killing Tito and Dividing Trieste	249
22. The Numbers, January 1999	261

<i>Epilogue: What Became of the Characters in the Book</i>	270
--	-----

<i>Appendix: Science Finds the Evidence</i>	275
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<i>Glossary</i>	281
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<i>Notes</i>	285
--------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	296
--------------	-----

<i>Illustrations</i>	305
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## PREFACE

*This Land is My Land, June 2016*

The view from the terrace of the villa, looking across the Gulf of Trieste towards Venice, is of the dark cobalt waters of the Adriatic. The sea shimmers and dances in the summer heat; hulking container ships from Odessa, Shanghai and Valencia wait out at anchor. Closer to land, yachts flit in graceful semi-circles, chasing the wind. The port and city of Trieste crouches with its face to the sea, its back to the mountains that rise behind it, sudden and steep. One of its main historical museums is housed behind the sea-front, in an old villa on a street that rises above the harbour. Lime trees crowd in on the museum's terrace. Seen from it, the city seems elegant, graceful, spires and twisting back streets. The architecture says confidently that Romans, Byzantines, Venetians and Austro-Hungarians have come and gone from here.

On a scorching June morning of blue sky, some pupils from the primary school that sits next door to the museum have gathered in a fast, giggling clump on the pavement. Spontaneously they start to sing. It's a pop song, one of the hits of the summer. Everybody across Italy has heard it a hundred times. In the bar, the supermarket, in the shops, clubs, in their apartments. In short, anywhere that people gather, where the radio is playing, where there's noise, movement and laughter. Which in Italy can be practically anywhere, except at the

very dead of night. It's by the Roman singer Max Gazzè, a bouncy, satirical paean to girls and love and destiny and, yes, coffee. It's called '*La vita com'è*' – 'life as it is' – and everybody knows the words. The school-children sing beautifully in perfect time. Down in the port of Trieste, below the terrace, the cranes turn slowly in the heat. The leaves on the lime trees that stand round the villa are still bright green, not yet flattened by the heat of July and August. The wind is warm. It's lunchtime. Things look calm. One would never think, standing here, that this is a place over which World War III could have started.



The train to Trieste takes its time clicking along from Venice. The elegant, high-speed starlets of the Italian railway system are the Frecciabianca, Frecciarossa and Frecciargento – the White, Red and Silver Arrow, three types of high-speed train that dash at 180 miles per hour across the main points on the Italian compass: Rome, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Florence, Taranto. Onto the platforms of the station at Venezia Mestre, they disgorge thousands of German tourists, Swedish backpackers, the nervous parties of Japanese holidaymakers in their sunshade straw hats and surgical facemasks. But many of the tourists stop here. Those going further down the line cross to another platform and take the slower regional train, the Regionale Veloce that goes to Trieste.

At first, the journey plods, the train pulling through the flat swamp land that surrounds the lagoon of Venice. There are short, muddy canals, fishermen drinking beer from plastic bottles and trying to catch eels, trees and fields that even in midsummer somehow conspire to look sodden. The journey goes in a huge semi-circle, heading north-east around the top of the Adriatic. The sea is somehow lost to the right as the train clatters forward, the railway line suddenly running parallel to a motorway. Twenty-ton articulated Volvos and Scania haul containers from Austria and Switzerland towards Slovenia, Trieste, Croatia and all points east. There are fewer people on this line, even in summer. But on listening to the conversations of

the different travellers, it suddenly becomes apparent that at least a third of them aren't speaking Italian. And as the journey continues over the top of the Adriatic, the language mix shifts perceptibly at each station. The Trenitalia carriage, with its bright blue seats and crisp air-conditioning, fills with the vocabulary of Slovenia, Croatia and the Balkans.

The woman opposite is reading a copy of *Slobodna Dalmacija*, a daily newspaper from the Croatian Adriatic coast. She turns the pages, folding the paper each time she does so. Apart from the cookery pages and the promotions for holidays in Sharm el-Sheikh, it's evident from reading the domestic headlines displayed opposite that most of the articles consist of those four staples of Balkans journalism: the regional politics of ethnicity and nationalism, and the plans that NATO, the UN and the EU allegedly have for Balkan land. Next come articles about the legacy of the 1990s conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo and Croatia. These focus on commemorations for the dead and anniversaries of key events in the war in question, as well as stories about people who are still missing, those thousands who disappeared during the different conflicts. Twenty years on from the civil wars of the 'nineties that tore apart the former Yugoslavia, you remember that memories in this part of the world are still fresh. But then you realise that these articles in the newspaper opposite are not all about what happened in 1992. Some concern the legacy of World War II. And the word 'Trieste' seems to appear in several headlines. What, one wonders, is this idiosyncratic, clearly still unsettled city towards which the train is travelling?

About thirty miles short of the Italian border with Slovenia, the landscape suddenly changes. One minute the train is pulling alongside a nondescript pine forest, the next the sea flashes up dark turquoise on the right, palm trees spin past the windows, and stark, white limestone hills rise above the Adriatic coast. It is like arriving in a different country. Past the shipbuilding town of Monfalcone, through a rushing alleyway of Wellingtonia trees and spiky palms, and suddenly on the right sits the Castello di Miramare, an Austro-Hungarian castle that

looks like a wedding cake. Ten minutes later, the train hisses and clacks past silos and marshalling yards, and pulls into platform three at Trieste Centrale. The passengers alight, while the engine and carriages vent the brake system in explosive blasts of compressed air. The station clock says 12.32. It's ninety-three degrees.

Outside the station entrance is where Italy hits the Balkans face-on. One taxi driver is Italian, and says he is from a family that in the 1930s settled further south-east down the Adriatic coast in Yugoslavia. He calls his family's town of origin by the Italian name 'Fiume'. This means 'river'. In Croatian its name is Rijeka, which is what it is called today. It's more than seventy years since September 1943, when the Italian army surrendered and signed an armistice with the Allies. Italians then made up a large percentage of Trieste's population. But with the surrender of Mussolini's army, communist Yugoslav partisans took revenge on many Italians living in Yugoslavia in places like Rijeka. They were told to take what they could carry, and then hit the road west to Italy. Some were threatened with death. The taxi driver, like many other local Italians forced off property in Yugoslavia three generations ago, still considers their house and land his property, even though it's now firmly in Croatia. The problem is that the Croatian government doesn't. Despite the fact that they've agreed to pay Italy compensation concerning reparations from the World War Two period. The shaven-headed man with a broad smile, who's sitting at the wheel of the VW minibus near the station entrance, doesn't call the town Fiume. He calls it by its Croat name, Rijeka, because he's Croatian. He's waiting to pick up passengers who have come to take advantage of one of the very much lesser-known attractions of the Balkans: dental tourism. It's a region where the the political-economics can be successful but are fragile and idiosyncratic. At their worst they are beset with endemic corruption, nationalism and ethnic division, and regional development is hamstrung by recent history. So every conceivable source of revenue is to be explored. Cheap and good dentistry is one. The people of the former Yugoslavia are inventive and resourceful, as befits as region that is no stranger to conflict. When

war hit Yugoslavia in 1991, and a million people fled as refugees, they ended up in unlikely places. Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur, Atlanta, San Francisco, Northampton. Among them were a fair number of teenagers, who were absorbed by the educational systems of their countries of refuge. And among these, some chose to study dentistry. When peace, of a sort, finally washed over ex-Yugoslavia in 1995, many of them came home and brought their qualifications with them. They had been trained excellently, and now found their home countries choc-a-block full of *stranci*: foreigners by the thousands, the soldiers, diplomats, aid workers and humanitarian staff from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) who had arrived to rebuild the Balkans. Many of these people enjoyed large, tax-free salaries, and needed good dentists. Thus a small homegrown industry was born. And the man at the wheel of the minibus outside Trieste station is waiting to ferry Italians off down the coast. They'll get a new set of dental implants or a child's prosthetic brace done at a third of the price, and the same quality, as it would cost them in Milan or Rome or Florence.

Rijeka is in Croatia. But many Italians still refer to it as Fiume, from the days when it had a sizeable Italian population. Both names in Italian and Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, as the *lingua franca* of the Balkans is called these days, mean the same thing – 'river'. The city was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1919, and was annexed by Benito Mussolini in the early 1920s and occupied by the Germans in 1943. Taken back by communist Croatian and Slovenian partisans in 1945, it then became part of Yugoslavia, now resting in the modern state of Croatia. For fifty years its blood-mired story was one of the brutal politics of displacement and revenge. So Trieste, as the first-stop city next door, was a natural refuge for all three nationalities. And since 500 BC, it's also always been a big and important port.

So leaving the Italian taxi driver and the Croat dental ferryman sitting in their vehicles parked in the shade, a 300-yard walk from the station reveals different languages and different peoples. The Italian

policewoman with her Ray-Bans and holstered Beretta 9mm, waving traffic across a zebra crossing, is obviously talking to a colleague in her native language. The three teenage girls, with their small backpacks with the names of their boyfriends and favourite bands inscribed on them in Tippex, are chattering in Slovenian. A man, woman and little child are speaking fast Mandarin. They're standing in front of a Chinese convenience store that sells everything from flippers and Batman beach towels to laser-dot pointers and plastic ashtrays sporting images of the Castello di Miramare. The men in tight T-shirts, heads shaved, counting handfuls of euro notes outside a betting shop, are muttering in Croatian.

The three men going back to their ship, whose T-shirts say that they work for a Rotterdam maritime salvage company, are laughing in Dutch. The Ukrainian merchant seaman on shore leave, sitting at the bus-stop, has made an early start on plastic bottles of Slovenian lager. He is staring at the Austrian couple next to him on the pavement who are trying to orientate themselves on their tourist map. The short and gaudily dressed prostitute is from Nigeria, almost certainly trafficked illegally into Italy.

Emerging from the small grid of streets around the station and the docks, the neo-classical and Austro-Hungarian architecture of the city's old centre bursts into view. Capturing it for posterity on their mobile phones are four American servicemen in civilian clothes. A waiter in a café speaks a local language, called Ladin, from up on the Austrian border. Here and there you can hear the occasional smatter of the Triestin dialect, a mixture of Dalmatian and Venetian. The city is nothing if not cosmopolitan.

The leaflets on the reception desk at the small two-star hotel inform the business traveller and tourist that there's no shortage of things to do, and see, in and around Trieste. Three miles out of town is the Castello di Miramare, the Austro-Hungarian castle you see coming in on the train. It was formerly the headquarters of some Allied units after the Second World War. Down on the coast there are some caves and grottoes with harsh orange stalactites, and a nearby beach with



turquoise sea. A little hybrid tramway and funicular railway climbs a thousand feet from Piazza Oberdan, up to the town of Opicina on the mountain above the city. There's a guided tour to be had at the headquarters of the Illy coffee company down in the industrial area, what it calls the Università del Caffè. The manufacturer of Italy's most-favoured beverage claims that Trieste was where coffee beans first entered Europe. This is something the Venetians would dispute, but Illy employees and aficionados can even work at their headquarters for a Masters Degree in Coffee Economics and Science.

Then there's the ferry that travels down to the Istrian peninsula in neighbouring Slovenia, the castle of San Giusto, and no shortage of old Austro-Hungarian coffee bars. Not surprisingly, Trieste also has several fish restaurants. Its cuisine is like the city: an eclectic mix of Italian, Austrian and Slovenian, touched by the influence of the sea. In the suburb of Prosecco, sitting 800 feet above the sea, there's a lot of tasting to be done of the sparkling wine named after the village. Meanwhile there are churches and art and beautiful architecture. Plus four different museums dedicated to the history of the city. Like a slightly misunderstood and beautiful model, Trieste exudes a confident and individual air. The stones of the ancient port tell of cultural elegance and long-established history.

But of all the places to visit in the city and its surroundings, one stands out for its sheer historical singularity. Down in a southern suburb, near the motorway that leads to Slovenia, there's a reminder of the brutal German administration that ran the city from 1943 to 1945. An old concentration camp – 'the only camp in Italy with a working crematorium', states the promotional leaflet. The number ten bus, it says, will take you directly there.

The Piazza della Borsa is the second largest square in Trieste, only slightly smaller than the huge Piazza Unità d'Italia. On one side of it sits the seventeenth-century neoclassical palace housing the city's Chamber of Commerce. A multi-ethnic and multi-lingual city Trieste might be, but first and foremost it's always been a port, and a city of merchants. Shipping, insurance, banking, the coffee trade and wine are at its heart.

In the middle of the square, two men are standing with a banner. They look bored. A child is taking a photo of them on a mobile phone. One of them holds a blue clipboard, on which is attached a list of seven signatures. 'The Free Territory of Trieste' says his banner. On it is the coat-of-arms of the city, the red shield with the silver halberd in the middle, pointing upwards. It commemorates the silver lance of St Sergius, a Roman soldier martyred in Syria in the third century AD for being a Christian. When he was put to death, says tradition, his halberd fell out of the sky and landed in the main square in Trieste. Kept in the cathedral of San Giusto, the weapon has reputedly never rusted, its metal refusing to accept gilding.

What do the two men want? A Free Territory of Trieste, is the answer. One of them passes over a leaflet. Italy, it says in brash, loud type, has occupied the city and surrounding land illegally. A law passed in 1945 by the Allied Commission in Rome declared the city a free territory. Italy has no rights over it. Trieste must have its own seat at the United Nations, a tax-free economic status within the European Union, and be a free port and independent trading zone. The city is hugely multi-ethnic, says one of the two men, thumb stabbing his list of seven signatures. 'It's a cold-weather Jerusalem,' as one of his colleagues has described it to the BBC. But doesn't it formally belong to Italy, after the 1954 London Treaty returned it to Italy? And didn't the 1945 law divide the city into two zones of military occupation, one American and British, one Yugoslav? And the 1947 United Nations Security Council Resolution that he is quoting merely recognised this? He shrugs. Things are more straightforward than that, he says. Italy invaded in 1947, and it's time for her to go. He has written several times to the UN in New York about this, and sent petitions to the European Union in Brussels.

Have they replied? He shrugs. No. But you know, he says, they're busy these days. Syria. North Korea. He gestures over at a building on the other side of the square, tall and glass-fronted. The ground floor is occupied by a shop, the smart, slick window displays of the Tezenis underwear chain. Even at midday in summer, the lighting captures the mannequins in the window just so, the pink bras, the men's boxer

shorts, the teenagers' pyjamas with rabbits on them. The eye is drawn automatically to the shop windows. What it isn't drawn to is the office on the floor above, where the windows hold huge lettered banners. 'Free Territory of Trieste: Trieste Libera,' they shout. Is anybody listening?

No, says the grinning barman two doors down. Not any more, not these days. He is balancing a tray on his right palm, bearing two very popular Venetian cocktails. They are Spritzes, large balloon glasses filled with nearly a pint of deep orange Campari and sparkling Prosecco wine. The ice clinks and reflects in the sun. A small bowl of crisps, and four purple olives the size of damsons accompany the drinks. What does he think of his neighbours and their petition? He laughs, twisting his index finger clockwise and anti-clockwise on his right temple in a classic Italian gesture.

'Pazzo,' he says. Mad. Then pauses and starts laughing. '*Sono squilibrato!*' They're unbalanced.

St Sergius' silver halberd on its red shield is much in evidence on the walk through the city. Mugs, mouse-mats, postcards, tea-towels, beach towels, baseball caps, lighters. It's also emblazoned on the little flag that waves from the top of the cab of the number ten bus. The vehicle's route goes up and around the front of the castle of San Giusto, built originally by the Romans, and then changed and adapted and added to by the Byzantines and Venetians and Austro-Hungarians. The bus clicks and hums as it rides the slope upwards, picking up the electrical current from the lines of wires overhead. Then there's a sharp plunge downwards; the Adriatic explodes in a turquoise spark when glimpsed between two walls, before the bus turns left into a longer, greyer boulevard. It gets more industrial with each hundred yards. A cemetery on the left, supermarkets and garages on the right. Pensioners on the bus reading the morning copy of Trieste's most popular paper, *Il Piccolo*, 'The Small One', so-called for its original tabloid format. The teenagers on the bus in their shorts and Converse All Stars are heading for the beach down in Slovenia. But before that there's a stop on Via di Valmaura, a wide boulevard that leads to an

industrial estate. A supermarket on the corner, an empty street, and then on the right high walls, and a six-storey red brick building.

La Risiera di San Sabba. The San Sabba Rice-Processing Plant. Italy's only wartime concentration camp with a fully functioning crematorium. Through the steel doors, and inside the actual building on one of the walls are a series of huge marble and metal plaques. From the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Italian Holocaust Survivors' Association, Trieste's Lesbian and Gay Community, the National Association of Partisans, they march along the wall. There's a dark tunnel of an entrance, and two doors on the left to the toilets and the bookshop. The architecture of the bathrooms seems very non-Italian, something horribly institutional and penal in the layout and structure of the Ladies' and the Gents'. The Germans re-designed them in 1943, says the helpful curator a few minutes later. To their own specifications, and kept prisoners' stolen possessions in there. Of course, he says, when the camp was liberated in 1945 by the partisans, it had dead bodies all over the place. He takes you through to the bookshop. In the camp courtyard, overlooked by six storeys of the old factory, it is boiling hot. This is where the building housing the crematorium stood. The actual incinerator was underground, reached by a set of steps. And on the left is a huge chamber with wooden beams, where rows of small, cramped stone cells stand in a row. Inmates have scratched and written messages on the plaster, in Italian and Slovenian.

'This really is the end ... I only hope the SS keep me alive.'

'Celestin Rodela, from Istria, born on 2nd October 1914, brought here on 26th April 1945.'

A scratched portrait of a female cellmate, drawn in red crayon before she was killed.

*'Pomozi Bog!'* (God help us!)

The bus ride back to the city centre thirty minutes later suddenly seems full of crackling life, smiles and abundant happiness.. The curators at the camp have a certain number of documents and records, they say, but have suggested a visit to one of Trieste's more erudite museums. The Istituto Regionale per la Storia del Movimen-

todi Liberazione nel Friuli Venezia Giulia. IRSML, thankfully, for short. The Regional Institute for the History of the Resistance in Friuli Venezia Giulia. And so two hours later I'm on the terrace of the villa under the lime trees, listening to the school-children sing. When it comes to archives, the IRSML is the real thing. A large detached house set in a beautiful garden; the entire first floor and basement are all one archive and library. Focused very firmly on a single topic: Trieste from 1939 to 1947. The helpful, softly spoken co-curator explains carefully what is in the archives.

Well, she says, everything to do with World War II in Trieste of course. Slovenian, Croatian and Italian partisans, missing persons, SS atrocities, Yugoslav atrocities, Italian fascist atrocities. Mussolini, the Allied occupation of Trieste, the post-war Allied Military Government, all the international fears about another war starting here. She counts off on her fingers. Oh, and deportations, refugees, Italian Holocaust deportees, and what happened after the war. We've got material from MI6, the CIA, OSS, SOE, Yugoslavia's OZNA, stuff from the Germans.\* There's the entire documentation of the Allied Military Government, and 3,000 books on Trieste alone. Oh, she adds, and a basement full of files from the American National Archives that almost nobody ever goes to look at. ('It's cold down there,' she says by way of warning, 'even in summer.')

Sitting at her desk, she appears mildly distracted. It must be the busy publishing work she is doing, I suggest, looking at the book manuscript she is copy-editing. The museum has its own small and erudite publishing imprint. The pages she is working on detail a very thorough, day-by-day account of the operational activities of some

\* MI6: Military Intelligence Section 6, the British foreign intelligence service .  
 CIA: Central Intelligence Agency, the US foreign intelligence service since World War II.  
 OSS: a US foreign intelligence service during World War II, superseded by the CIA.  
 SOE: Special Operations Executive, the secret British organisation created during World War II to carry out sabotage and encourage resistance in enemy territories overseas.  
 OZNA: Department of National Security, Yugoslavia's security service from 1944 to 1946.  
 Gestapo: Geheime Staatspolizei (Secret State Police), the secret police force in Nazi Germany.  
 Abwehr: the German military intelligence service from 1921 to 1944.

German units in Slovenia and north-eastern Italy, from September 1943 to April 1945. Most visitors to the museum and archives come in spring and autumn, she says. Of course, in summer everybody's on the beach, and in winter it's too cold.

And she is right: all the material is there. The diplomatic cables, the Yugoslav intelligence reports, the Allied Military Government's notes, MI6's operational priorities, war crimes investigators' progress and interviews written down. Original German documents from and about the Gestapo and Abwehr. The details of how Marshal Tito's partisans shot down American Dakota transport aircraft. Churchill's and Harold Alexander's and Harry S. Truman's memos back and forwards. Cable after cable from British ambassadors in Rome, Cairo, Belgrade, Vienna, American agent assessments by the OSS and CIA, and endless analyses on Stalin's and Tito's intentions. All often in original form, sitting in cardboard containers and old box files. The sheer volume of material, and its organisation, is impressive. The woman's colleagues are walking encyclopedias of information. The archive on the thousands of Italians, Slovenians, Croats and Germans who went missing and were reportedly murdered or deported between 1943 and 1945 is around 15,000 pages alone.

Six weeks after the end of the war, in July 1945, the second Allied military governor of Trieste arrived in the city to take up his posting. An American lawyer working for the US military, he wrote the following in his diary of the moment when he rounded the headland leading along the Adriatic, and saw the city for the first time:

Trieste is fairyland. The stuff dreams are made of. It is possible at that moment (of seeing it) to imagine that everyone living in such a place would be so happy to be there, that he would be filled with love for his neighbour, and all about him.

When the time came to write his autobiography about his time in Trieste, drawing on diary entries, he was to write the following:



If this, the Cold War, was a war, then where was its opening, partially decisive engagement? I assert without equivocation that this engagement occurred in Italy in the Po valley and the north Adriatic littoral of Trieste. I further contest that its focal point as an element of the Cold War was the political and doctrinal confrontation at Trieste.<sup>1</sup>

And after months of reading the lost, hidden, deserted documents in the IRSML archive, one understands that the calm view from the villa's terrace is very deceptive. I realise that Trieste is a place over which World War III could have started. And the archives in the villa explain exactly how, and why.

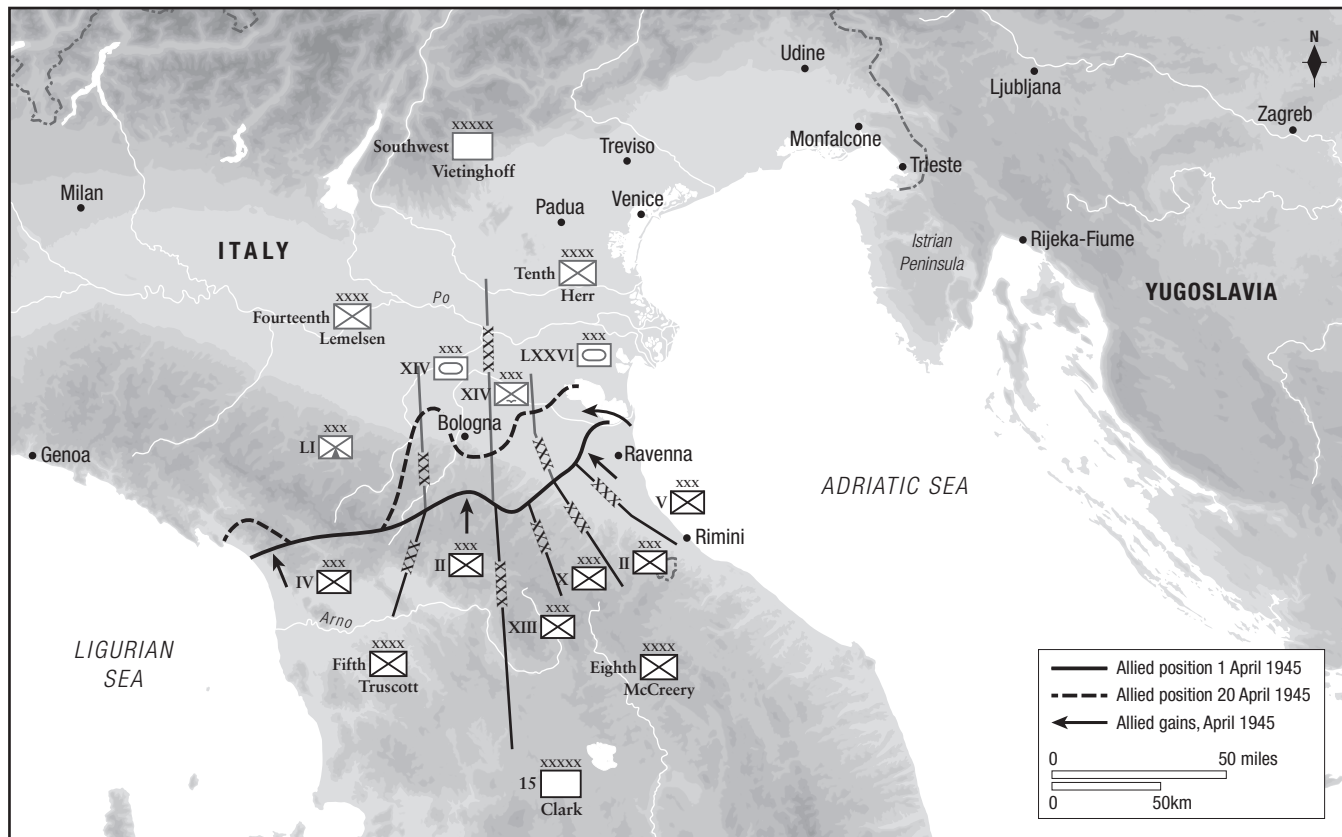
## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was written on the Adriatic coast in Trieste, at Bardonecchia in the Italian Alps, at Finale Ligure on the Mediterranean, and at the Circolo dei Lettori at Palazzo Graneri della Roccia in Turin. Thanks and acknowledgements go to many people, but particularly to the following: my brothers Anthony, James and Martin, my sister Flora, and my niece Valeria. Also to my journalist friends Carlotta Rocci and Giulia Avataneo in Turin, the literary translator Serena D'Auria in Caltanissetta, and Dr Fulvia Benolich at the Istituto Regionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione nel Friuli Venezia Giulia in Trieste. I would particularly like to thank Sara Skondras for her help in Turin. Fiammetta Rocco was extremely encouraging from the beginning, while Andrew Lownie's agenting skills were exceptional. Many thanks as well to Kate Moore at Osprey Publishing, who from the start saw the secret of this book.

# MAPS

1.	Northern Italy and the Adriatic, April 1945, showing the Allied advance before the race for Trieste	24
2.	Trieste and surrounding territory	25
3.	Trieste, the Morgan Line and international boundaries from 1937 to 1954	26
4.	Trieste and the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia	27
5.	The border area between Italy, Austria and Yugoslavia, 1945	28
6.	Trieste and the Istrian peninsula	29
7.	Trieste, the Adriatic and Yugoslavia	30

NORTHERN ITALY AND THE ADRIATIC, APRIL 1945, SHOWING THE ALLIED ADVANCE BEFORE THE RACE FOR TRIESTE



## TRIESTE AND SURROUNDING TERRITORY

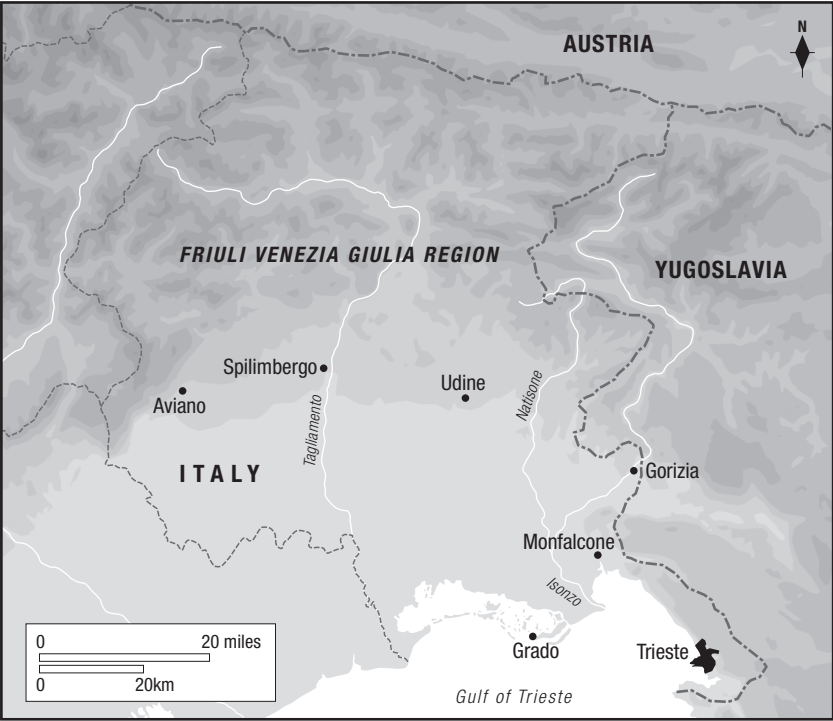


TRIESTE, THE MORGAN LINE AND INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES  
FROM 1937 TO 1954

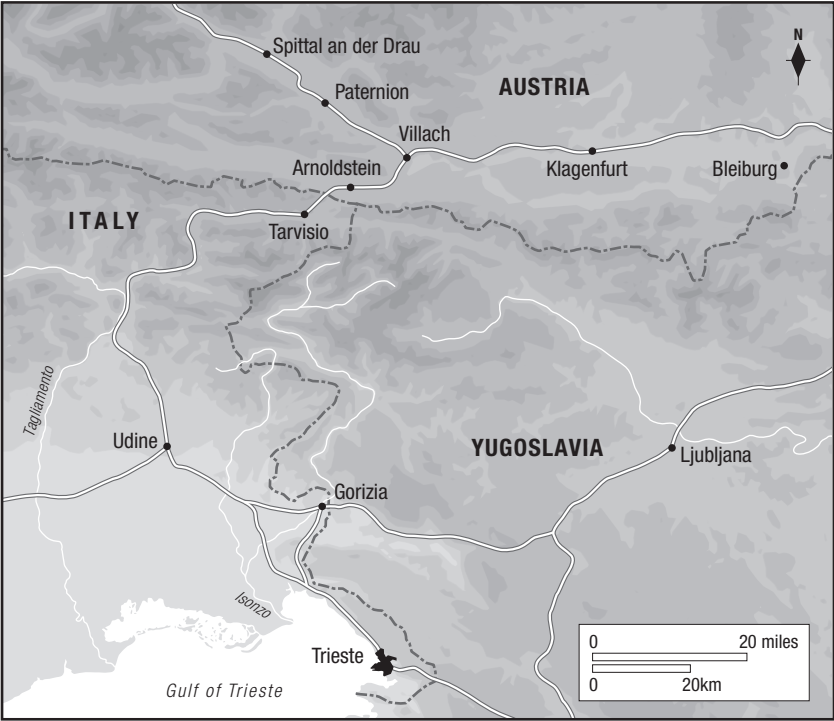




TRIESTE AND THE REGION OF FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA

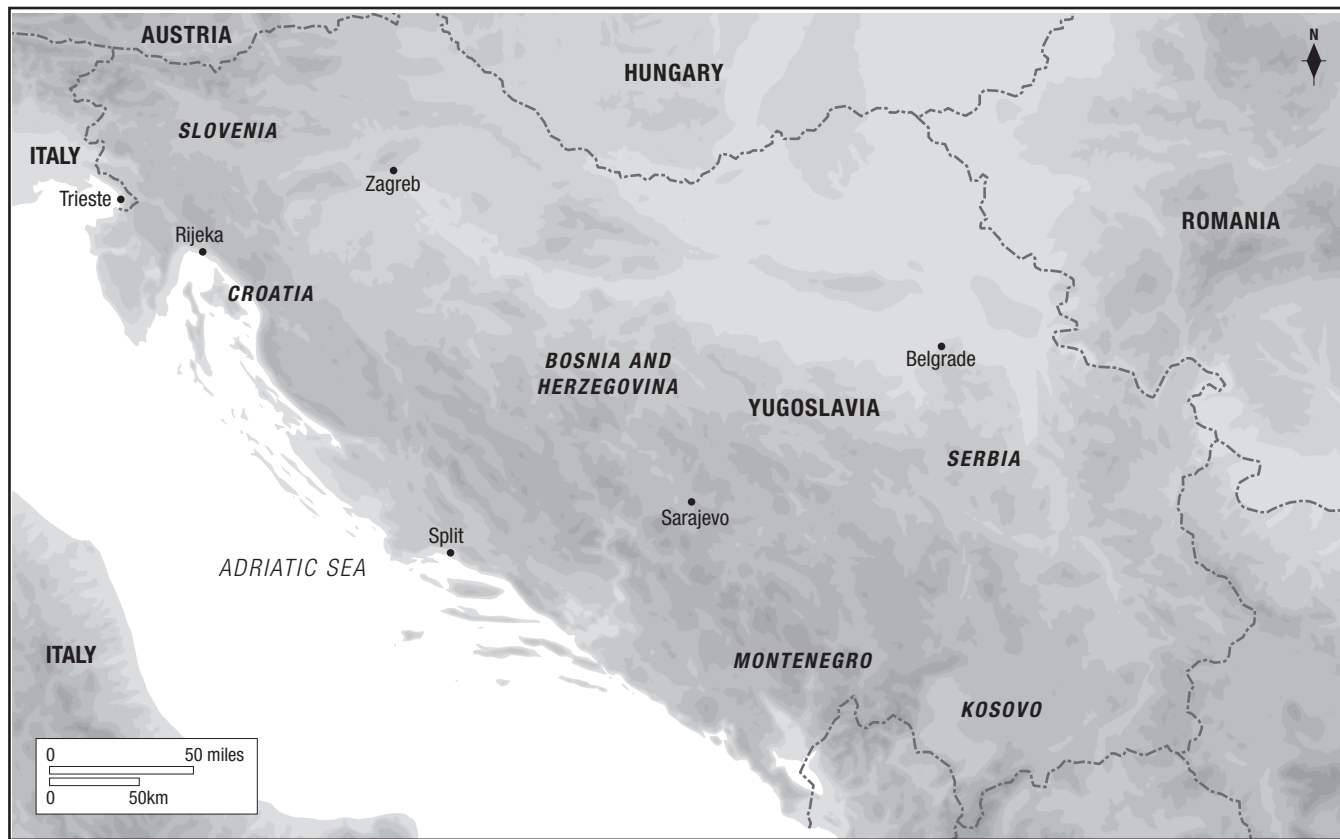


THE BORDER AREA BETWEEN ITALY, AUSTRIA AND YUGOSLAVIA, 1945



## TRIESTE AND THE ISTRIAN PENINSULA





TRIESTE, THE ADRIATIC AND YUGOSLAVIA

# PART ONE

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## THE FALL OF TRIESTE